

THEMES FOUND IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN 1980 AND 2000

by  
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This is a comparative study of the themes related to adolescence found in twelve young adult books. Six award-winning authors were selected who have written books around 1980 and again around 2000. The study looks at the way themes such as friendship, divorce, and race are depicted in young adult books and analyzes whether those depictions have changed over the twenty-year period.

The trends found in newer books are towards characters being more developed, the truth about society being told more, and the idea that some things stay the same. These trends acknowledge the sophistication of today's young adults and that they can handle the truth.

Headings:

Adolescent Literature

Adolescent Development

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## Introduction

Has the content of young adult literature changed very much over the past twenty years? Young adult literature is actually a relatively recent phenomenon because people did not really start thinking of people between the ages of twelve and eighteen as young adults until the twentieth century (Russell 58). Some people consider the real beginning of young adult literature to be S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in 1967. What separates books like *The Outsiders* from the books that people in this age range read prior to 1967 is that the book is about young adults and written for young adults. Previously books with young adult characters were not really written for that age group.

The 1970's was the decade for problem novels that dealt with real problems that young adults faced, such as drug abuse, divorce, poverty, etc. The 1980's saw a boom in genre fiction, especially romance and horror. Then the 1990's brought about a rise in "middle school literature," which included "an expansion of the audience, which freed authors to tackle more serious subjects and to introduce more complex characters and considerations of ambiguity" (Cart 96).

The purpose of this study is to determine how accurately the age of adolescence is depicted in young adult novels, if the way themes of adolescence are dealt with has changed, and if young adult authors' styles have changed over the past twenty years.

## Methodology

A sample of young adult books was selected from the early period (1980's) and from the 2000's. Particular criteria were used to select these books: 1) the author had to have won certain awards either the Margaret A. Edwards Award or a Newbery Medal, 2) the author had to have published a book around 1980 and again around 2000, and 3) the

books should be considered realistic fiction. The authors and their works selected for this sample are as follows: Robert Cormier's *After the First Death* (1979) and *The Rag and Bone Shop* (2001), E. L. Konigsburg's *Journey to an 800 Number* (1982) and *Silent to the Bone* (2000), Walter Dean Myers' *The Young Landlords* (1979) and *Handbook for Boys* (2002), Katherine Paterson's *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978) and *The Same Stuff as Stars* (2002), Jerry Spinelli's *Space Station Seventh Grade* (1982) and *Stargirl* (2000), and Cynthia Voigt's *Dicey's Song* (1982) and *It's Not Easy Being Bad* (2000). (See appendix B).

These six authors are all award-winners; some have won awards for the body of their work and others have won awards for individual books. Cynthia Voigt, Robert Cormier, and Walter Dean Myers have won the Margaret A. Edwards Award, which honors a lifetime contribution to young adult literature. In addition to this award, Voigt has also won a Newbery Award, the other prestigious award that authors had to have won to be included in this study. Katherine Paterson and E. L. Konigsburg have both won the Newbery Award twice and Jerry Spinelli has won it once. Spinelli won it the most recently (in 1999) out of the six authors. A few of the books used have won awards. *The Young Landlords* won the Coretta Scott King Award in 1979; *Dicey's Song* won the Newbery in 1982; and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* was a Newbery Honor book in 1978.

A second requirement for being included in the study was that the author had to have written a book around 1980 and another around 2000. The study is intended to compare these authors to themselves and with each other within that span of time. Also, neither the older nor the newer book could be set in a different time period from when it was written. Richard Peck's career, for example, spans the twenty-year period and

includes the necessary awards, but all of his most recent books have been historical fiction novels. Gary Paulsen is another author who fits the previous criteria, but he was not selected because his latest book is an autobiography so it is not set in contemporary times. None of the books are mysteries or romances and all are considered realistic fiction. All the books focus on young adults living in the times in which they were written. This is done in order to facilitate comparing the differences between the way books written during the two different time periods handle adolescent themes. These three factors narrowed the field of possible authors in the study to six with a total of twelve books to be analyzed. The following section describes themes related to adolescence that are found in the books selected for this study. The themes are identified and then examples from the books they are found in are given. At the end of each section there is a comparison made between how the older and the newer books present the theme. At the end, there is some final analysis of the changes found and speculations made about the future of young adult literature.

### **Themes**

Adolescence can be characterized by a few themes that affect a large portion of young adults. Gisela Konopka of the Center for Youth Development and Research at the University of Minnesota developed a statement on the concept of normal adolescence in 1973. Out of her research with young adults five key concepts and six qualities of adolescence emerged. The five concepts of adolescence are an “experience of physical sexual maturity,” an “experience of withdrawal of and from adult benevolent protection,” a “consciousness of self in interaction,” a “re-evaluation of values,” and an “experimentation” (Konopka 298-300). She found the qualities of adolescence to be

“audacity and insecurity,” a “deep sense of loneliness,” a “high degree of psychological vulnerability,” “mood swings,” a “strong peer group need,” and a “need to be argumentative and emotional” (Konopka 300-1). In addition to these concepts and qualities, Laurence Steinberg, a professor of Psychology at Temple University, adds the following beginning signals of adolescence: biologically, there is the onset of puberty; emotionally, the beginning of detachment from parents; cognitively, an emergence of more advanced reasoning abilities; interpersonally, a shift in interest from parental to peer relations; socially, they are training for adult work, family, and citizenry roles; and legally, juvenile status (Steinberg 6). These ideas about adolescence are reflected in the young adult novels included in this study.

Seventeen literary themes have been identified to be present in the books used in this study; some of them relate directly to adolescent development as defined above and some of them reflect characteristics of our society. The seventeen themes are friendship, getting into trouble, interest in the opposite sex, money, divorce, single parents, remarriage, problems with parents, grandparents, younger siblings, concern over grades/school, popularity, puberty, race, death, neighborhood, and job/working. The first three themes are put together because they occur in the most books. Friendship is the theme found most often (ten times) in the novels, which seems reasonable since Konopka identified a “strong peer group need” as one of the five characteristics of adolescence (Konopka 301). Steinberg also identifies a shift towards peer relations (Steinberg 6). The second most frequent themes found (eight times each) are getting into trouble (sometimes specifically legal trouble) and an interest in the opposite sex. These two themes also reflect what was found in the literature on adolescence. The former stems

from several different factors: detachment from parents, feelings of audacity, need to be argumentative, and the arrest rates of young adults, which have been increasing since 1984 (Steinberg 438). These factors can easily lead to a young adult getting into trouble with adults—especially those adults who still view them as children. The interest in the opposite sex stems from adolescents experiencing physical sexual maturity or puberty. Young adult characters dealing with money issues, a theme that occurs in six books, comes out of the reduction of adult protection and may be related to the fact that there are a significant number of young adults living in poverty (Steinberg 113).

The following themes are discussed together because they seem to be related to the family life of young adults. Divorce, being raised by a single parent, and remarriage are all themes that have developed out of the increased divorce rate in the United States. Fifty percent of all marriages today end in divorce, so “virtually all American adolescents either have divorced parents or have friends with divorced parents” (Garland 15). It is estimated that sixty percent of young adults today will spend some time possibly five or more years in a single-parent household and more than seventy five percent of divorced parents remarry (Steinberg 123). Problems with parents can be related to these types of marital issues, or they can be related to the young adult’s developmental stage. The developmental reasons young adults have problems with their parents seem to be their need to be argumentative, mood swings, and their struggle for autonomy (Steinberg 13). A rise in influence of grandparents on young adult lives can be attributed to the reduction of parental relations and the fact that young adults tend to have a low amount of conflict with their grandparents (Steinberg 148). Siblings, on the other hand, tend to be sources of high amounts of conflict.



The next themes are either related to the development of the adolescent's mind and body or are societal factors affecting their development. Concern over grades and school are related to the adolescent gaining more advanced reasoning capabilities and the fact that they spend a majority of their time in school at this age. Popularity is important to young adults because of their deep sense of loneliness, psychological vulnerability, and interest in peer relations. Puberty comes up because they are experiencing this stage in biological development and girls are reaching puberty at a younger age today (Garland 15). Race can be a factor in books written when the issue is prominent in American society, such as, the appearance of books about minorities in the 1960's (Mertz 122). The fact that today's schools are a mixture of many different races also influences this theme (Garland 15). Death is not a theme that is unique to young adult literature, but it is something with which they deal. Novels dealing with problems such as death were especially popular in the 1970's (Cart 96). The neighborhood in which young adults live can have an impact on their lives especially those that present young adults with negative influences since they are vulnerable at this age to peer influence. Books about young adults working are appropriate since more adolescents are working today than at anytime in the past forty years (Steinberg 11), they are permitted to start working during this time, and it is part of their social training for adulthood.

Now, that the connections between these topics and young adult development have been made, each theme will be explored in more detail with comparative analysis between the older and newer books at the end of each section.

## Friendship

Friendship plays a role in ten of the young adult novels in this study. In some cases, that role is very important, in others it is minor, but still present. Sometimes it is an unusual or unlikely friendship that develops. The older and newer books split evenly on the theme of friendship with five from each time period. One book where friendship plays a key role to the story's development is *Silent to the Bone*. In this book, Connor Kane and Branwell Zamborska have been very close friends up until this story begins for reasons that are explained along the way, but it is the rebuilding and the strength of their friendship that saves Branwell. Branwell is in a juvenile facility for purposely dropping his baby half-sister, Nikki, causing her to go into a coma. This accusation has caused him to become silent, and he refuses to give any information about what happened to Nikki. It is through Connor's persistence and creative detective work that he is able to get to the bottom of what really happened so that he can clear Branwell's name. The relationship between these two thirteen year olds is established at the beginning of the story.

I cannot explain why Branwell and I became friends. I don't think there is a *why* for friendship, and if I try to come up with reasons why we should be friends, I can come up with as many reasons why we should not be. But I can be definite about the where and the when. *Where*: nursery school. *When*: forever. (13)

These are the opening lines of chapter two, which is the beginning of the section entitled "Days before day one." Day one refers to Branwell's first day in the juvenile facility he is put in after the incident with Nikki. It is Connor's commitment to his friend and belief in his innocence that steers the progress of the investigation. Connor explains in chapter one about Branwell breaking his silence in the end. He says, "He spoke to me [first] because even before I knew the details, I believed in him. I knew that Branwell did not

hurt that baby” (9). This is an example of a book that is based heavily on a strong friendship between two teenagers, which other teenagers can relate to because they have friends that they believe in and trust more than anyone else as well.

Another novel that is heavily influenced by a friendship is *It's Not Easy Being Bad*, which is the story of seventh graders Mikey and Margalo. It seems like these two characters could not be much more different because Mikey is a jock who cannot get along with anyone other than Margalo because Mikey is aggressive and uncompromising while Margalo is into fashion and tries to get along with other people. From Margalo's perspective “she didn't think the things other kids didn't like about Mikey were *wrong* things. They were just Mikey, like her thick braid and her short, solid, quick-moving body, the bossiness, the never-backing-down, the not-listening, the only-seeing-things-her-own-way. Mikey was a one-way street with a high speed limit” (2). These two girls work together, however, to wreak havoc on anyone who gives them a hard time in school. For example, they get a lot of people at school to sign a petition to try to get seventh graders permission to play sports and are almost successful even though the principal does not like Mikey. They also make up “The Little Miss Muffin Award,” which they tape to the lockers of six girls who think they are better than everyone else (67). All of the girls were embarrassed because everyone saw the awards and started laughing at them. The friendship they have gives them comfort and the strength and support to stand up to the people who get in their way at school.

The friendship that Jimmy and Duke form in *Handbook for Boys* also seems very unlikely at the beginning because Jimmy seems to only be interested in putting his time in at the barbershop and getting out of there. He seems resistant at first to the lessons that

Duke and the other men at the barbershop are offering to teach him so that he can make something out of himself. Duke invites him and Kevin to go see a Knicks game one Sunday afternoon. Kevin does not go and Jimmy does not really want to at first, but he has a good time. Jimmy says, "I hadn't dug Duke's taking me to the game too tough at first either, but I saw he was just trying to be in my corner and helping me to get my stuff correct. You don't goof on somebody like that" (104). Jimmy comes to respect Duke and realizes that the things that Duke and the other guys at the barbershop say are for his own good. Duke refuses to give up on Jimmy, and it seems to pay off in the end.

Jason, a twelve year old, has an unusual friendship with the younger sister of a boy in his class in *The Rag and Bone Shop*. The girl he is friends with, Alicia, is seven years old. Jason, however, feels more comfortable being a friend with someone younger than himself because he is shy and unsure of himself. "He liked the company of younger kids. They paid attention to him, listened to him, laughed at his jokes" (13). At the beginning of the book it is the first day of summer vacation, which makes Jason happy because at summer camp he hopes to "leave all the old kids behind, especially those who made his life miserable. Not that they were cruel or mean or made him the object of pranks or tortured him or anything like that. Mostly they ignored him. He was rarely asked to join in their games or activities. He usually sat alone in the cafeteria and *felt* alone even when others were at the table" (12-13). When Alicia is found murdered after the last time Jason went to see her, however, he is brought in for questioning supposedly to see if he can offer any information to help find her murderer when the police actually think that he committed the crime. During the interrogation, the interrogator, Mr. Trent asks him about friends and he says, "Not many. I guess I don't make friends too easy"

(83) and also pointed out that Alicia did not make fun of him except in a playful way that he did not mind. It seems that Jason was suspected of Alicia's murder because their friendship was an odd one.

Angel befriends two people in *The Same Stuff as Stars*. First, she becomes friends with the local librarian who grew up with her great grandmother with whom she now lives and the mysterious "Star man" who teaches her about the constellations on clear nights. Her friendship with the librarian, Miss Liza, is interesting because her great grandmother was not friends with the woman and does not seem to like her very much even now after all these years. Miss Liza helps Angel find books about stars and cooking, helps her find out about school and catching the bus, and gets her great nephew to drive Angel places, such as when she needs to go visit the "Star man" in the hospital. Miss Liza almost becomes a surrogate mother for Angel since no one else seems to be able or willing to help her most of the time. Angel's friendship with the "Star man" also seems to be an outlet for her to have something fun and exciting going on in her life when everything else seems so bad. The "Star man" ends up being her great uncle who she thought was dead. Even though he may not have been a good role model for anyone in the past, his friendship with Angel gives her new comforting knowledge that helps her make it through this tough time.

In *Journey to an 800 Number*, Max meets a lot of interesting people with whom he becomes friends during his summer stay with his dad. He first meets Sabrina and her mother at a diner at which he and his father stop to eat. Sabrina has a fascination with people whom she calls "freaks." These are people like the talented flute player whose hand got cut off by a New York subway and doctors had to sew it back on. Max finds

Sabrina very intriguing and wants to get to know her better. He learns a lot about appearance through his friendship with Sabrina since every time they see her mother she looks different, and they both are going by different names. Another friend Max makes who teaches him something about life is Trina Rose. Trina is a famous Las Vegas singer with whom Max stays while his father's camel is being used for her act. One thing Trina told Max was that his father was "the last person in the world that you can say abandons anyone" (115). During his time with her, he makes it his responsibility to wake her up every day and bring her coffee. He enjoys the time that he gets to spend living in her lavish hotel room, and he comes to love and respect his father more because of his conversations with Trina. The friendships that Max makes help him know more about himself and the ways of the world.

At the end of *Space Station Seventh Grade* Jason has started to form a friendship, however unlikely, with Marceline McAllister who was his archenemy at school. When they chance upon each other one day riding their bikes through the countryside he comes to realize that there is more to McAllister as a person than he had previously thought. Jason finds himself trying to defend himself to her and prove that he is a good person. He tells her "I ain't no raccoon killer! I love raccoons! I felt rotten even since I threw the bottle at that one! I gave my Valentine's candy to Esther Kufel! I teach little kids stuff! I can't sleep right ever since Peter Kim's little brother got killed! I'm a good kid! You hear? My stepfather says so! I'M A GOOD KID!!" (227). There is a sequel to this book that further explores Jason and Marceline's relationship. Jason also has interactions with the boys with whom he is friends that give the reader a picture of how friendships are with boys at this age. After a conversation with Peter Kim about what ideas gave

them goose bumps, Jason realized “This kid was more complicated than I ever thought. I didn’t used to think he talked much. He does. Or can...I didn’t know he could get excited about things. He can” (101). This realization shows that boys at this age do not really have any deep discussions; they just enjoy doing things together. The boys do normal boy things together. They play baseball, they go trick or treating, they camp out, they have a snowball fight, they talk about girls, etc. This book gives a broad picture of middle school boys’ friendships and at the end gives an idea about how girls and boys can become friends at this age.

In *The Young Landlords* a group of neighborhood friends create an Action Group to try to get the slums in their neighborhood cleaned up. When they talk to the owner of one of the slums, they do not get any commitment from him to do anything about his building, but they do end up owning the building for the small sum of one dollar. The group then tries to run the building, but they come to realize why the slumlord did not do more about cleaning up his building as tenants do not always pay rent. The group brainstorms ways of solving their problems and one of their solutions is to organize a street fair, which is very successful. By the end of the book, however, with the help of their bookkeeper it seems that the group may be able to make enough money to start making the repairs they want to. Another example of the bonds of friendship in this book is seen when one of their friends is accused of helping rob the store where he works, a few of the boys risk their lives and their money to try to prove his innocence. The first thing they do to try to prove his innocence is go into a warehouse at night where they think the stolen goods are. After getting shot at, they get out of the building. Their next plan is to use the money they earned from the street fair to buy some stereos from a store

that they think are the stolen goods. This book really shows what a group of friends are capable of doing if they work together.

Gilly Hopkins making friends with anyone seems like an impossibility when the reader first meets her in *The Great Gilly Hopkins* because she does anything and everything to alienate anyone who tries to get close to her. This is understandable because Gilly is a foster child who has gone through three homes in less than three years. So it is all the more important that she develops such strong friendships with Maime Trotter, her foster mother; William Ernest, the other foster child Trotter is taking care of; and Mr. Randolph, the old blind man who lives next door to them. Gilly takes care of them all when they come down with the flu. She also starts helping William Ernest with his schoolwork and tries to teach him how to defend himself since he is a small kid. After returning the money that she stole from Mr. Randolph she takes his “hand, instead of his elbow as she usually did, as a kind of thank you” (98). Gilly comes to call them all her family. When Agnes, a schoolmate, sneers, “What family?” Gilly calls William Ernest her brother, Trotter her mother and Mr. Randolph her uncle. The reader and even Gilly do not realize how much she has come to love these people until she has to leave them to go live with her real grandmother.

Dicey also develops several friendships without even trying to in *Dicey’s Song*. At school, Dicey was happy just to sit in the back and be invisible to everyone else, but when she had to work with a partner in Science class Mina, a girl in her class, asks her if she wants to work together. This friendship blossoms even more when Mina stands up for Dicey because a teacher accuses her of plagiarizing a paper. Mina and Dicey are on similar levels intellectually so they get along well. Dicey also becomes friends with Jeff



by chance when she continually runs into him playing his guitar after class on her way to work. Dicey's family has an interest in music and her sister Maybeth is learning to play the piano so their friendship begins through this common interest. Dicey learns that having friends and getting close to people is not the worst thing and can actually be enjoyable, and it is nice to have people to share in your ups and downs.

### ***Friendship- Comparative Analysis***

In the five older books in this study, the friendships are more traditional because they are formed either through school or proximity to home. *Space Station Seventh Grade* is a perfect example of this. Jason's friends are boys that live near him because he walks over to their houses when they go places, and he goes to school with these same friends. The young adults in *The Young Landlords* all live close to each other because they form a group to improve their neighborhood. Dicey's friends are people that she meets at school. Mina is in classes with her, and she meets Jeff at school too even though they are in different grades. Gilly becomes friends with the people with whom she lives. *Journey to an 800 Number* is the only exception because Max is on summer vacation away from home and all of the people that he becomes friends with are unusual: a Las Vegas singer, a con artist's daughter. The only thing this book has in common with the other older books is that the friendships are not very deep and are not discussed as friendships.

The friendships that characters make in the newer books are more unusual, and developed, and the protagonist is more likely to examine the strangeness of their friendships. *The Rag and Bone Shop* features the friendship of a twelve-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl that is questioned by characters in the book. Even Jason admits that

it is a little funny. Angel becomes friends with an older man that she calls “Star man” in *The Same Stuff as Stars*. Her feelings about him are discussed when he is no longer there at night and then again when she sees him in the hospital. Jimmy’s friendship with Duke in *Handbook for Boys* is a little unusual because Duke is his employer. In *Silent to the Bone* and *It’s Not Easy Being Bad* the protagonists even question why they are friends with their best friends and think that their friendships are unusual. Both of these friendships did start in school, but the author makes it seem strange that these two people have become friends.

### **Getting into Trouble**

There are eight books that have a character(s) who gets into trouble either with the law or at school. Four of the books are from around the 1980’s and four of them are from the 2000’s so they are also evenly distributed between the two decades. The first book to discuss is *The Great Gilly Hopkins* because Gilly manages to get into trouble at school and with the law. The way that Gilly gets herself into trouble with the law is by stealing. She steals the money that she finds in a book at Mr. Randolph’s house, and she steals all the cash in Trotter’s purse so that she can buy a bus ticket to California to go find her real mother. She even tried to find more money at Mr. Randolph’s to steal by offering to clean his house and by setting up Agnes as a look out and enlisting William Ernest’s help. She is not successful in getting the bus ticket because the clerk is suspicious of a girl with this much money on her own and calls the police who come and take Gilly to the police station where Trotter comes to retrieve her. Despite having stolen her money, Trotter does not press charges and even convinces Gilly’s caseworker to allow Gilly to stay with her. Gilly gets into trouble at school by getting into a fight on her first day of

school with a group of boys on the playground because she steals their basketball. She is the victor of the fight in her mind because she “noted with satisfaction a long red line down the tall boy’s cheek. She’d actually drawn blood in the fracas. The boys looked a lot worse than she felt. Six to one—pretty good odds even for the great Gilly Hopkins” (24). She is taken to the principal’s office where he tells her that he does not want her fighting at his school and that she should use her opportunity at a new school to get a new start. He offers to help her if she ever needs anyone to talk to. Gilly is just good at getting herself into trouble and that is part of the reason why she has seen so many different foster homes in such a short span of time.

In *Space Station Seventh Grade*, Jason gets suspended from school for what he tells his mother was “nothing,” he was just laughing. Actually, he had had two previous warnings about his making obscene noises in class or the hallway. His suspension comes after a talent show in the auditorium where he lets out a loud moose call before ducking into the bathroom while a girl on stage is playing the trombone. The vice-principal goes in the bathroom and takes him away to his office. He gets suspended until his parents can come in with him to the school. His mother is very upset and says things like, this is not like him and what did he do. In the end, he has to apologize to the girl whom he had interrupted while she was playing the trombone. Overall, Jason seems like a good kid though as he tells Marceline.

Dacey gets into a little bit of trouble at school as well in *Dacey’s Song* without her really doing anything. She first gets into trouble in her home economics class because she does not try very hard on the apron that she makes, and it shows. The teacher makes everyone stand up in front of the class wearing their aprons for everyone else to see.

People laugh at Dicey's, and the teacher looks at her with anger. Dicey gets an F in the class when she gets her report card. The other time she gets into trouble is because a teacher accuses her of plagiarizing a paper. This does not amount to very much because she did not plagiarize and Mina stands up to the teacher for Dicey. Dicey never really does anything that a person would expect to get into trouble for, but things never seem to work out how she thinks they will.

Several characters in *The Young Landlords* get into trouble with the law. Paul and his friend Dean have to go down to the police station to explain their version of why they were in a warehouse in the middle of the night. They went into the warehouse to try to find the stolen goods that their friend Chris is accused of stealing. They want to prove that he is innocent of the crime. While they are in the warehouse they are shot at and have to run for their lives. At the police station, they find out that the warehouse is legitimate, and it was a guard that shot at them. The police tell them that they will try to convince the warehouse not to press charges against them since they came in to give their story. Chris is accused of helping someone steal stereo equipment from the place where he works. Nobody ends up getting into any real trouble because the real perpetrator is discovered, and Chris is exonerated.

Mikey is a character that gets into a lot of trouble at school in *It's Not Easy Being Bad*. The principal comes to know Mikey pretty well because of all the things that she does. The first time she gets into trouble is after no one shows up or sends regrets for not being able to make it to her Halloween dinner party. She finds out that Heather McGinty told everyone not to go because it was a joke. Mikey went up to her at lunchtime and flipped her entire tray of food all over Heather. The principal, Mr. Saunders, comes and

takes Mikey to his office where he tells her that she is the rebellious, antisocial type of girl who ends up pregnant (52). Mikey seems almost offended that Mr. Saunders does not expect girls to be troublemakers and seems to be determined to make him think twice about that. She later gets into trouble with Mr. Saunders again for supposedly “stalking” Heather McGinty because she humiliated Margalo. Mikey just happens to be wherever Heather is trying to go with a smirk on her face that scares Heather. Mikey is not the type of person to take people hurting her or her friends, but sometimes her methods of getting back at people gets her into trouble.

*Handbook for Boys* has two characters who get into trouble with the law. Jimmy Lynch has a hot temper and one day at school assaults another student who makes him mad. He goes before a judge who tells him he can either assign him to a youth facility for six months or assign him to a community mentoring program for six months. Jimmy is put in the mentoring program with Duke who volunteers his time to try to straighten up kids like Jimmy because he thinks they are worth the effort (3). Kevin, the other character who got into trouble, also works with Jimmy at Duke’s barbershop. Kevin is in trouble because he got caught smoking pot. He gets into trouble again in the book because he is again in possession of pot and no longer has the option of probation since it is his second offense so he is sent to the youth facility. The community mentoring program seems to be working for Jimmy because he is not only learning how to control his temper when the old men at the barbershop make him angry, but he is also learning about the ways of the world in general.

Branwell in *Silent to the Bone* is in a juvenile facility for his offense. The police picked him up and took him to the juvenile behavioral center because the babysitter,

Vivian, had told the paramedic on the way to the hospital that Branwell had dropped his baby half-sister, Nikki, on the floor causing her to lose consciousness and breathe unevenly since that time. There is no way of knowing what will happen to the baby, but if she dies Branwell could be charged with involuntary manslaughter. What complicates the whole situation is the fact that after Branwell screamed for Vivian to come help the baby, he does not say a word to anyone. His only defense seems to be to refuse to talk. His friend, Connor, is able to get the needed information to get to the bottom of what happened through a set of flash cards with names and words on them. The names that Branwell points to lead Connor to talk to those people and find out what they know that can help. Connor is able to figure out why Branwell stopped talking and the real reason Nikki is in the situation she is. After spending twenty-seven days at the behavioral center Branwell is released. Even though Branwell did not commit the offense that he is suspected of he still feels some responsibility for Nikki's situation because he did not do anything to stop Vivian. So even though he is released from the behavioral center he still gets counseling afterwards to help him deal with his feelings of guilt.

In *The Rag and Bone Shop* Jason is accused of killing Alicia who was his friend since according to the police he was the last known person to see her alive. Jason does not know that he is the accused and when he agrees to questioning he thinks that it is in order to help the police find the real murderer. Despite being innocent, the expert interrogator gets Jason to admit to committing the crime, which scars Jason mentally. The real murderer is found during Jason's interrogation, but admitting to something he did not do makes him start to think about really killing someone. This book provides an

extreme example of teenagers being accused of doing things they did not do, and who adults do not believe for whatever reason.

### ***Getting into Trouble- Comparative Analysis***

The newer books on this topic tend to have characters committing more severe crimes than in the older books. Characters in the newer books are accused of killing a girl, trying to kill a baby, beating another person up, smoking pot, and stalking another person with the intention of harming her. The older books' characters have playground fights, make inappropriate noises, and plagiarize a paper. There are some exceptions to this rule, however. Gilly is caught stealing money from two different people, Chris is also accused of stealing, and Paul and Dean are accused of breaking and entering when they try to prove Chris' innocence of his crime. These two offenses are more severe than the ones found in the older books, but they still do not seem quite as severe as murder and attempted murder. The reason why *The Young Landlords* may be an exception is because it is about African-American young adults who tend to be accused of committing crimes more often than white young adults. Despite the exceptions the trend does seem to be towards depicting young adults being accused of and committing more serious crimes than they previously were.

### **Interest in the Opposite Sex**

Two different kinds of interest in the opposite sex appear in these books, explicit and implicit. Five older books deal with the subject while only three newer books do. Starting with a newer book, interest in the opposite sex is what got Branwell into trouble in *Silent to the Bone*. He found himself attracted to an older woman in the form of Vivian, the au pair living in their house and taking care of his new baby half-sister.

Vivian recognized his interest and took advantage of it to do whatever she wanted because she knew that Branwell would not say anything to his parents about it. When she would take a bath in the middle of the day she would leave the door open and one day Branwell accidentally walked in on her. The second time this happened Branwell says, "I'm not sure if it was an accident. I suppose it was a mistake I was waiting to make...and she knew" (242). The situation in the bathroom escalated, and it became Branwell and Vivian's secret. It was this secret that kept Branwell from telling his parents about Vivian's boyfriend coming over and her neglecting the baby because he was under her control. This also led to him not talking after the accident with Nikki. Connor had also experienced similar feelings towards Vivian when he had talked with her. She asks him several times to light her cigarette, and he takes pleasure in doing this for her. He even buys her a hair barrette to give to her at Christmas. These two boys become highly intrigued with this older woman because she understands that she has sex appeal and knows how to use it. She also realizes that they are going through puberty so that she can use her powers to her advantage.

In *Space Station Seventh Grade* Jason has developed an infatuation with one of the school's cheerleaders, Debbie Breen. He is on the football team and after he sees her cheer for someone who got injured he wants to get into the game so he can get hurt too. When the seventh grade has a hayride he tries to arrange things so that he will be in the same truck that she is in, but at the last second she switches to join some other friends. While at the bonfire, however, Jason gets his chance to make an impression on Debbie because he gets to cook her hotdogs and marshmallows for her because she liked them the same way he does. Debbie is obviously not interested in him though because when



he asks her to come over to see the space station that he is making she tells him that she has a toothache. Jason starts to realize at the end of the book that looks are not everything when he hangs out with Marceline and looks were all that Debbie really had to offer. His seventh grade infatuation never really amounts to much. It is just his first experience with liking a girl and her not liking him back.

In *Stargirl*, Stargirl is a unique girl, which is what first draws Leo to her, and it is possibly his interest in collecting porcupine ties that first interests her in him. Whatever it is that brings them together, they start dating for a while. At the height of their relationship some girls at school refer to Leo as “Starboy,” and he says, “I could never have admitted it, but I was thrilled” (78). Leo has some problems dealing with people who do not like Stargirl anymore and wants people to accept her again so that he does not have to feel ostracized as well for liking her. When he starts to feel uncomfortable about the way other people feel about Stargirl, he begins to have mixed emotions. On Valentine’s Day, there is a bed sheet hung on the school’s announcement sign in the courtyard that has a “Valentine heart enclosing the words: STARGIRL LOVES LEO” (129). His first impulse is to say look she loves me and the second is to rip down the sign. Stargirl even tries to change for him and acts like a normal person, but people still do not accept her and eventually Leo cannot deal with this anymore. Stargirl moves away, and Leo is left feeling like she is the one who got away.

Miro’s sexual interest in Kate is sparked by him seeing her half naked in the back of the bus in *After the First Death*. Kate took her pants off because she had peed in her pants and wanted an opportunity to dry out her underwear. When Miro comes back on the bus and sees her they are both embarrassed. After Miro sees her, though, the author

explains Miro's thoughts, "He dreamed sometimes in the night of dusky girls, rounded and full, whose flesh flirted with his eyes through wisps of veils. He had never actually seen a woman or a girl without clothing, except for photos in magazines. Not until this girl, Kate. Her slim, flat buttocks and the fullness of her thighs had startled him" (105). Kate tries to use the sexual interest that she has sensed in his eyes later in the book to get him to open up to her so that he will spare her life. When their bodies are entwined in the tree at the end she again tries to appeal to his interests but to no avail because he shoots her in the heart. Miro was trained not to have emotions and feelings so his interactions with Kate confuse him, but in the end his training takes over, and he is again stony.

Paul develops an interest in his fellow building owner, Gloria, in *The Young Landlords*. After they have gone to the warehouse to look for the stolen goods, and he and his friend Dean were shot at Paul says, "Maybe it was the excitement—I don't know. It had to be something different. But when Gloria was standing there locking up the office and I was standing there next to her, it just came out. It was almost as if somebody else besides me said it" (149). What he tells her is that he loves her, but she starts laughing so he is humiliated and goes home. For a few days afterwards she tries to call him at home, but he will not talk to her. Then she comes over to his house, and he cannot avoid her anymore. She apologizes for laughing, but explains that it is because she was embarrassed because she feels the same way about him. They kiss after that, and Paul says, "So I kissed Gloria Wiggins. I haven't kissed many girls, but I have to admit kissing Gloria wasn't the worst way to spend a little time" (159). So Paul is not rejected, which is what he thinks at first. After the kissing incident, there is not much more discussion about Paul and Gloria's relationship.

There are a few very minor interests in the opposite sex that can be lumped together in discussion. The “interest” in *The Rag and Bone Shop* does not really exist, but it should be discussed because Jason is accused of being interested in Alicia even though she is only seven, and he is twelve. Trent asks Jason, “Were you attracted to her?” and says, “She was a pretty little thing, wasn’t she?” to be suggestive (120). This line of questioning totally upsets Jason and Trent has to back down, however. Jason had never thought of Alicia the way Trent was insinuating. There is possibly some interest present between Max and Sabrina because they are similar in age, and she intrigues Max. He gets his father to go to the restaurant of the hotel where Sabrina and her mom are staying even though that does not seem like the normal type of place his father would go. Nothing is ever said or done that directly suggests an interest between them, but Max does seem to care about her opinion of him. Finally, in *Dicey’s Song* Jeff asks Dicey to go to a school dance with him. It is clear that Dicey has never really thought about Jeff in such a way, but she tells him that she is too young to go to a school dance. She is happy that they are still able to be friends after this awkward situation. It is natural for kids this age to start having stronger feelings towards people of the opposite sex so that is why even these seemingly insignificant instances should be mentioned.

### ***Interest in the Opposite Sex- Comparative Analysis***

*Silent to the Bone* and possibly *The Rag and Bone Shop* (newer books) and *After the First Death* (an older book) are probably the most explicit books because the interest in the opposite sex is more sexual than in the other books. In all of the other books the interest is just in being with a person of the opposite sex or at most kissing them. The interest in *Silent to the Bone* involves a lot more than that. Branwell gets an erection after

kissing Vivian's neck when she is standing in front of him in nothing but a towel. In *The Rag and Bone Shop*, Trent implies sexual interest during his interrogation of Jason. The reason that *After the First Death* is more explicit with the sexual interest even though it is an older book is that the intended audience is probably older than for the other two books. Nothing is ever said, however, as explicitly in this book as in the other two, but Miro's thoughts after seeing Kate half naked and Kate's thoughts about using her sex appeal against Miro show similar sexual tension to characters in the newer books. The other older books lack the sexual tension and explicit wording that is found in the newer books.

### **Money**

Young children are raised thinking they can be whatever they want to be, but "real-life observations don't support this, and that may be why books exploring differences in social classes are especially popular with young adults" (Nilsen 118). Six books in this study explore this topic, four of which are older books and two newer ones. Two of the books are very similar in their discussion about money even though one of them was written in 1982 (*Dacey's Song*) and the other in 2002 (*The Same Stuff as Stars*). Both stories are about young girls, Dacey 13 and Angel 11, who find themselves living with their grandmother and great grandmother respectively when their own mothers can no longer take care of them. Their new guardians do not really have the money to support them and their siblings so they are forced to deal with problems brought about by a lack of money. In Dacey's case since she is a little bit older she actually goes out and gets a job so that she can help support her family. Her grandmother also applies for and receives welfare support since Dacey has a younger sister and two younger brothers in addition to herself. Dacey is constantly concerned with how much things cost, however.

She especially has difficulty when she and her grandmother go to Boston to see her mother. When she and her grandmother go out shopping and then to lunch she wants to order the cheapest thing on the menu, but her grandmother insists that she have something she would not have at home, the club sandwich and a large coke (65). When she and her grandmother go to Boston to see her mother, her grandmother gives her money while they are there to buy Christmas presents for everyone. Dicey frets about this responsibility as she does about anything dealing with money. Despite the family not having much money and wearing a lot of hand me downs and having few clothes in general neither Dicey nor her siblings ever experience any ridicule or humiliation or express any discomfort because of what they have to wear. This book explores some of the thoughts and practices of the less financially stable.

Angel is also confronted with having very little money while trying to meet her and her brother's needs. A very poignant example comes shortly after Bernie and Angel are left with their great grandmother when Angel realizes that there is not much more than canned peaches and beans to eat in the house. "Santy Claus" or so their great grandmother calls some mysterious man who leaves food for them occasionally, brings them some milk and cereal, but it is not the cereal that Bernie likes. So when their great grandmother gives Angel five dollars to go to the store she promises Bernie that she will get him the Sugar Pops that he likes. The only problem is that the cereal costs more than three dollars and does not leave her much to buy anything else with. Angel is concerned about them eating nutritiously and even tries to educate her old great grandmother about their needs. The great grandmother in this book does not do anything to reduce her

financial burden by applying for welfare for example, but she did not know that she was going to be getting these kids or for how long they would be there.

In *It's Not Easy Being Bad* it is not readily obvious to people that Margalo's family does not have very much money because she dresses so stylishly. What people do not know, at least not until Heather McGinty tells everyone, is that she gets all of her clothes at second hand stores very cheaply. One day Margalo wears a sweater dress that has a famous designer's name on it and everyone looks at her to admire how good she looks. Then Heather tells people that the sweater Margalo is wearing was her mother's, and she had gotten rid of it. Frannie tells Margalo that Heather did not want anyone to tell her why everyone was laughing at her because Heather thought Margalo would be embarrassed about having to buy her clothes that way. Frannie tells Mikey and Margalo "I never think it means anything how much money someone has...Do you? I don't think money's anything more than another difference, like your religion, or race" (215). When Mikey asks Margalo if she minds being poor she says, "Of course I do. Jeez Loueez, Mikey, how dumb can you be? Wouldn't *you* mind if...you had to buy your sneakers at a discount drugstore?" (227). Mikey accuses Margalo of never trying to do anything about not having money, but Margalo is offended because she does not feel there is anything she can do. In the end, people at school come to realize that money is not everything either. They come to respect Margalo and want to go shopping with her because she is always so stylish looking.

*The Great Gilly Hopkins* offers a similar situation under different circumstances. Since Gilly is a foster child she does not have any money to call her own. When she comes to live with Trotter she sees that she is not a wealthy woman either, which is

probably why she volunteers to be a foster mother. Gilly thinks the house is dingy, and there is hardly room for her to walk in the bedroom she is given. As mentioned earlier, Gilly steals money from Mr. Randolph and Trotter to try to run away from this situation. Interestingly enough at the end of the book when Gilly's real grandmother has learned about her existence and has brought her to live with her, Gilly gets to experience what it is like to have money. Her grandmother is wealthy and has a big house all to herself. She even paid her daughter to fly across country for Christmas to force her to see Gilly. Gilly learns, however, that living with her grandmother and having money and blood relatives does not necessarily make her happy. She misses her previous life and the friends that she had made living with Trotter. This book offers a strong message about watching what you wish for.

*Journey to an 800 Number* offers a similar message about money not being the answer to everyone's happiness. When Max goes to stay with his father, Woody, who is a camel-keeper he enters a life very different from the one to which he has become accustomed. Back home he goes to restaurants that are private clubs you have to pay lots of money to join so you can pay to eat at the restaurant. He has to stay with his father because his mother is going on her honeymoon with her new rich husband. While he stays with his father, Max wears his new private school jacket with the Fortnum crest on the pocket even though it is blazing hot. He takes pride in telling his father that his stepfather gave him fifty dollars for his trip. As one reviewer of the book stated, "Max is at first humiliated at what he considers a difference in class" between himself and his father (Nilsen 114). Max comes to see the error of his ways through the many people that he meets while traveling around with his father. He realizes that despite the fact that they

do not have much, the family who owns the taco stand at the fair is proud of what they have and willing to share with Max even though he acts as if he is better than they. After Max accuses Manuelo of keeping some of the money he earned from selling rides on Woody's camel, he is mad at himself and realizes that Manuelo was doing this out of the kindness of his heart since Woody was unable to work. Also when he figures out in the end that Lilly and Sabrina are con artists who go around to conventions to get a free place to stay and free food, he sees that things are not always as they seem. Spending time with Trina Rose, the famous Las Vegas singer, shows Max that having money, someone to do everything for you, and being able to sleep all day does not necessarily make a person happy. During his trip Max comes to see that different things make different people happy and money is not the root of all happiness.

The issue of money takes a slightly different twist in *The Young Landlords*. Paul Williams and his friends have come into possession of a slum apartment building that they are trying to improve. The group of friends learns the difficulties of owning an apartment building in Harlem where people do not pay rent, but it is too difficult to kick them out. When they try to talk to one of their tenants, he chops up the banister with karate chops, which they then have to fix because someone complains about the building being unsafe. Paul and Gloria get into a heated conversation about people not paying rent one night because Paul wants to get rid of the people who do not pay and Gloria thinks they should have compassion because their tenants do not have anywhere else they can go. Gloria realizes that there are extenuating circumstances that people cannot help, like the tenant who is in the hospital or the woman whose man left her. The group tries to find other ways to raise money to support their building, and they sponsor a street fair.



They raise a good amount of money, but then the boys use the money to buy stereo equipment. They are not being frivolous with the money; they do it in order to prove that their friend accused of stealing the equipment was not involved, but that it was someone else. Their gamble works, and they prove his innocence, but if they had not risked their own money for his sake he may have been found guilty. Through this impractical situation Walter Dean Myers is able to teach some practical lessons about having money to young adults.

### ***Money- Comparative Analysis***

The issue of money only appears in two of the newer books and in both of these cases there is a protagonist who is poor. Angel and Margalo both find themselves not having as much money as some of the people around them because of their family situations. Dicey is in a similar to the situation to these two characters because the Tillerman family is also poor, and they go on welfare. Dicey would not be able, realistically, to get a job to help out in the newer stories because there are not many thirteen year olds who get jobs these days. In the other older books, more issues related to money are explored. Stealing is addressed in *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, for example. In that book, as well as *Journey to an 800 Number*, there are characters who have money who are portrayed as not being happy or at least the message is that money will not buy you happiness. Class is an extremely hot topic with *Journey to an 800 Number* since Max looks down on his father because he is a camel keeper. None of the protagonists in *The Young Landlords* are portrayed as being poor, but they have conversations about helping the poor. The older books seem to be trying to give the reader a message about

not looking at poor people differently or wanting to have more money than you do, while the newer books just try to depict the realities that young adults who are poor face.

### **Divorce**

None of the books used in this study are directly about a young adult dealing with the divorce of his/her parents, but rather the topic is a background situation that affects the lives of the protagonists. Not talking about the subject directly allows the authors to show that life can go on after parents get divorced without preaching the lesson to them. Three newer books and two older books feature divorced parents. In one of the books, both main characters have gone through their parents getting divorced. In *It's Not Easy Being Bad* Margalo's parents have been divorced for some time because her mother is remarried, and Mikey's parents have just recently gotten divorced. It is never discussed whether Margalo sees her father, but Mikey lives with her father and sees her mother occasionally on weekends. To tell another girl about her situation Mikey says, "I'm staying with my mother this weekend, but I don't start getting jumpy about that until Friday. She likes me better since the divorce, but I'm not exactly her favorite person a lot of the time" (229). Margalo does not ever express her feelings about her home situation except to comment on the many rules and problems that her family has because it is a conglomeration of several different families.

In the other three novels that feature divorce only one character has experienced their parent's divorce. Jason's parents in *Space Station Seventh Grade* are divorced, but he does not ever say it directly. He lives with his mom and his stepfather, however and tends to look at the bright side of the divorce. At Christmastime, he says, "One good thing about a broken family: when you open your last Christmas present at home, and

you're sad because there aren't any more, all of a sudden it occurs to you you still have one parent to go" (123). So he and his sister go visit their father, and Jason says that his stepbrother, Timmy, is upset because "He wanted two fathers too" (124). When his father comes to pick them up at the train station he has a woman with him. Jason does not seem to have any problem with spending the holiday with a stranger. His only worry is that she is Jewish and that might affect his getting presents in the future if his father marries her. So the most important thing to Jason is presents and not what his parents do with their lives.

In both of E.L. Konigsburg's books, there is a character who has dealt with this situation. As mentioned earlier, in *Journey to an 800 Number* Max's parents are divorced and his mother has gotten remarried. The opening chapter of the book sets up this situation and gives some ideas about how Max feels about it. Max says, "My mother divorced him because of his camel" (3). It seems that Max's bad feelings about his father and his father's camel are a product of his mother's feelings. She has turned him against his father so to speak. I think since Max comes to realize that everything is not as his mother has taught him he sees that there are two sides to every story, and he needs to respect that before making judgment calls about people.

In *Silent to the Bone* it is Connor's half-sister Margaret who has gone through her parent's divorce. Her situation was particularly difficult because her father fell in love with one of his students who became Connor's mother. Connor and Margaret have a remarkably good relationship considering their connection. Margaret still holds a lot of anger towards her father even after so many years. In her mind Margaret has almost erased her father as her father and refers to him as she would any other person. At one

point she asks Connor, “Is your father home?” and he responds, “Yes, so is yours” (204) because it is the same person. Connor tries to help the situation as best he can. To show that the situation between them is getting better and that his father really does care about Margaret, Connor adds after his dad called her “Margaret Rose” that “She loves it when he calls her Margaret Rose” and after she called him dad that “He loves it when she calls him dad” (207). After this conversation Connor says, “They didn’t hug or kiss when they said good night, but the air between them was gentle” (207). Through her and her father’s involvement in helping Connor with Branwell’s situation they are eventually able to further repair their relationship, evidenced by the fact that Margaret invites everyone over to her house for a New Year’s Eve party at the end of the book. Having a secondary character be the one who experienced this situation allows for the reader to get an outsiders opinion of the situation. This way it is shown that things are not as bad as they may have looked if Margaret had been the one describing the situation.

Jimmy’s parents are divorced in *Handbook for Boys* he tells the reader very matter of factly. After this he says, “But a week ago my mom got a letter from my dad. He lives in New Jersey, only an hour and a half away, but he wrote a letter instead of coming by. She said he was making noises like he wanted to get back together with her” (16). Jimmy asked her what she thought about that, and she said that it might work out. He did not seem to share the same sentiments because he told her “Things don’t work out that easy” (16). Jimmy does not seem to be impressed as he does not think that this will amount to anything. He seems to be okay living with his mom and with working at the barbershop for Duke where he is getting plenty of male influence in his life.

### ***Divorce- Comparative Analysis***

Divorce does not seem to be handled very differently between the two decades, especially since none of the books has it as the main theme. *Journey to an 800 Number* is the only book that has much discussion about a character's life before and after the divorce and his feelings about it. In all of the other books, it just seems to be a part of the character's lives that they do not think much about anymore. This could be the result of two different factors. The first is that the divorce rate "had increased markedly since 1950 and rose steadily, and at times rapidly, until 1980. Between 1980 and 1990, the rate of divorce remained more or less constant" (Steinberg 122). The divorce rate was going up much more in the decades previous to 1980, so it was more of an issue and a lot more children were dealing with this issue than ever before so it made sense to be writing books about this new situation. The other factor is that divorce was a popular theme to write about during the age of the problem novel, so many books were written on the topic during that time. Today's authors want to produce something new and different.

### **Single Parent**

There are a lot of difficulties in being a single parent, but some of the parents in the books in this study do a better job than others at it. *Journey to an 800 Number* has several examples of single parents: Max's father, Woody; his mother, Sally; and Sabrina's mother, Lilly. Woody seems to do a pretty good job with Max, especially as he does not usually have him around. He is good at taking Max's comments about his lower class ways and his camel without getting angry. He is patient with Max, and in the end his patience pays off because Max learns that everything is not the way he thought it was before he went to live with his father. His mother also seems to have done well for him. After she leaves Woody, she gets an associate degree in hotel management and finds a

good job as executive housekeeper at a school where they have a place to live and Max could receive a good education nearby. She and Max have gotten used to the lives of the people around them and Max's new stepfather will continue to feed their every want. Lilly, on the other hand, seems to have taught her daughter all the ways that they can cheat to get food and lodging without getting caught. Sabrina seems to have justified everything they do in her mind so that she does not really think it is that wrong. Maybe outside of vacations Lilly is a better role model for Sabrina since she does seem to be a smart girl. Since the young adults being raised by single parents seem to be healthy, it can be said that the parents did a good job on their own.

Angel and Bernie's mother, Verna, in *The Same Stuff as Stars* is not quite as good at raising her children alone. Their father is in jail, but they do seem to visit him on a regular basis before they move away. Verna seems to feel that her youth was taken away from her when she had children, and she wants to get it back. She wants to get rid of her burdens so she abandons her children with their great grandmother who cannot really take care of them. It does not seem that she was a very good mother even before this occurrence. Welfare took Angel and Bernie away from her once already because she was not taking care of them. Angel carries around "taxi money" so that she and Bernie will have a way to get home in case their mother forgets them somewhere again. When her mother comes home at night Angel wonders how drunk she is going to be. When they pack up their possessions to leave they have very little to take with them. Verna also does not seem to be able to handle Bernie very well. He whines a lot and seems spoiled. She does not set a good example for either of her children. Angel acts as if she is the adult more than Verna does, telling Verna to put on her seatbelt, for example. Angel

seems to think that if their father whom neither of them really knows would come back things would be different. She wishes on a star for this one night, but Bernie does not want his father to come back. When Angel's father escapes from jail and comes to get her, however, she does not leave with him because she does not trust him. Verna's actions leave Angel feeling constantly abandoned.

In two other books a character is living with only one parent, and they seem to be adjusted to their situation. Mikey lives with her father after her parent's divorce in *It's Not Easy Being Bad*. She seems to think that her mother likes her more now and her father seems to be supportive. He was going to be her sous-chef at the Halloween party she planned, and when she comes down with the flu at her mother's, her mother takes her home for her father to take care of her. He stays home from work to be with her. So her dad seems to be better at taking care of Mikey than her mother is. Jimmy also seems to be fine only living with his mother. He did get into trouble, but that is more of a product of his temper than because he only lives with his mom. After he gets in trouble, Jimmy's mom is always pleading with him to do the right thing to keep him from throwing his life away in jail. She encourages him to listen to Duke and do what he says. Jimmy does not seem to think anything of it when his mom says something about getting back together with his father. It is not clear whether this is because he does not think that it will happen, and he does not want to get his hopes up or that he is happy with things the way they are, and he does not really want them to change. These two characters are living with parents that really care about them and are doing the best they can on their own to raise them.

There are also two books that allude to a time when the children's parents were single parents raising the children on their own. This happens in *Silent to the Bone* and *Dicey's Song*. In *Silent to the Bone*, Branwell and his father had a good relationship when it was just the two of them. This is one reason why Branwell was upset by the fact that his father did not tell him about Tina. Dicey's mother, on the other hand, seems to have gone crazy because of a lack of money and man and an abundance of children. Branwell's father did not handle one situation as a single parent very well, and Dicey's mother did not handle being a single parent very well at all.

### ***Single Parent- Comparative Analysis***

When one looks at this topic with regards to the two different time periods, they split evenly in how they treat single parenthood. There are newer and older books that portray single parents handling things well, and there are newer and older books that portray single parents handling things poorly. *Journey to an 800 Number* and *Silent to the Bone* provide examples of good and poor single parent situations. *The Same Stuff as Stars* is an example of a horrible situation, as is *Dicey's Song*. The mothers in both of these books abandon their children. The two newer books, *It's Not Easy Being Bad* and *Handbook for Boys*, give examples of protagonists that live with one parent who really seems to care about their well-being. There are always going to be single parents who handle the new situation well and those that do not, so there should not be much change in the way this theme plays out in young adult books.

### **Remarriage**

Not only do characters in these books have to deal with their parents getting divorced, they have to deal with them getting remarried, possibly to people they do not



like. Remarriages occur in two older and two newer books. Sometimes the remarriage is not really discussed, it is just present, as in *It's Not Easy Being Bad*. Margalo's mother is remarried, but she does not comment on this other than how this situation affects her use of the phone or lack of money due to so many people living together. For more comments about how this experience feels one can turn to *Silent to the Bone*, *Journey to an 800 Number*, or *Space Station Seventh Grade*. The first account is of a negative experience and the other two are more positive. Margaret and Branwell have both experienced their parents getting remarried. Branwell's mother died when he was born and then his father met his new wife in the genetics lab where he works. Branwell was not really consulted about this and that was what hurt him the most because he and his father had a good relationship. Connor finds out about Branwell's feelings about this in talking with Margaret. Margaret understands what Branwell is going through since she had experienced the same thing when her father married the person who would become Connor's mother. She told Connor that when Branwell came downstairs to see his father with Tina for the first time, "The look on Branwell's face brought tears to my eyes...because I had been there. I recognized the look" (42). Just telling Connor about this brought tears to Margaret's eyes all those years later, but she remembered, "I looked over at my dad—our dad—and I think I knew, even before my mother did, that we were never again going to be the same kind of family we had been" (43). This situation was not handled very well by Branwell's father, but in the end Branwell came to accept the new situation.

Max seems to be happy that his mother is getting remarried and only disappointed that he has to stay with his father while she is on her honeymoon. It seems that Max is

most happy because the man his mother marries is rich so he will now go to private school and to fancy places all the time. Max was separated from his father after his parent's divorce since his mother moved away, and Max also separated himself from his father by downgrading him. He looked down on his father for being a camel-keeper and not having very much. When his father would come to visit him, he never wanted him to bring his camel. The camel and even his father embarrass him. So Max is actually happy about his mother getting remarried because he likes the fact that his new stepfather has money and looks more presentable than he thinks his own father does.

Despite the fact that they get on each other's nerves occasionally, it seems that Jason and his stepfather have a pretty good relationship in *Space Station Seventh Grade*. The book opens up with Ham, Jason's stepfather, accusing him of eating the chicken that he had saved, hidden in the refrigerator to take to work for lunch. Jason, of course, denies doing it, but Ham does not believe him. Jason just enjoys making his stepfather mad, but Ham seems to be pretty laid back. He tells Jason's mother not to worry too much when Jason gets suspended from school. She thinks that we would think differently if it was his own son that was in trouble, but he denies this. Ham seems to treat Jason like he is his own and only enjoys giving Jason a hard time about things like his Christmas list because that is the type of person that he is. Jason never says anything about hating his stepfather or wishing he would go away. Jason still has a father that he sees on a regular basis so he does not have to feel like Ham is trying to take over as his father, which can often be a source of conflict between children and their stepparents.

### ***Remarriage- Comparative Analysis***

Remarriage is interrelated with divorce and single parenthood since divorce creates the other two situations. More than seventy-five percent of divorced parents get remarried so if divorce happens remarriage is likely to happen as well (Steinberg 123). The feelings of the protagonists with regards to their parents' remarriage are only discussed in two of the books in this study, *Silent to the Bone* and *Journey to an 800 Number*. The difference is that one of the protagonists, Max, was pleased that his mother got remarried, and Branwell was not pleased at first because of the way that it happened. The other two books are also from different time periods and do not discuss the remarriage. The reader only knows that remarriage exists and nothing can really be determined from that information. Remarriage seems to be put in a more positive light in the older books since Max is happy and Jason is not upset about it. The newer books show a character experiencing more pain and unhappiness with the remarriages; Margaret and Branwell are hurt by them and Margalo does not want to talk about her family situation. The reality that single parents remarrying is not always a smooth transition is addressed more in the recent books than in the past.

### **Problems with Parents**

Some characters have problems with their parents, and they let them know about it. Others have problems and keep them to themselves or tell someone else. One newer book and two older books show a character having a problem with a parent. Max, in *Journey to an 800 Number*, does not really like his father very much, mostly because he sees him as being in a lower class than himself. He likes to make fun of his father's scant living conditions, his clothing especially his hat, and his camel. When Max and his father are going to go to a nice restaurant at the hotel where Sabrina is staying he asks his

father, “Do you have a jacket and a necktie?” and added, “And I don’t think they require a hat” (32). When Woody asks Max what he would like to do for the rest of the month they have together Max says he wants to be on the cruise with his mother because “All I know is that first class is something I was meant to get used to, and life with a camel isn’t any kind of training for it” (82). Another thing that gets on Max’s nerves is the fact that his father calls him Bo, which is short for his real first name Rainbow, but Max continually tells him that his name is Max or Maximilian. When they go to the convention center and go to the loading entrance Max asks his father, “Don’t you ever get to go in the front door any place?” (46). Max likes pointing out all the ways that he sees that his father is of a lower class than himself.

Ben, the son of a military psychologist, in *After the First Death*, obviously has some serious issues with his father. These are seen through his writings that he claims are not a suicide note or “even a prelude to one” as well as his father’s own thoughts at the end of the book (5). Ben’s problems with his father started when his father sent him to talk to the terrorists that were holding a busload of children hostage on a bridge. The problem was that Ben felt like he betrayed his father by divulging the information that he knew about the military’s plan of attack when the terrorists tortured him to see what he knew. What made matters worse was the fact that his father told him that was what he had expected him to do and that is why he had allowed him to learn that information. His father sent his son so that the terrorists would trust the information that he gave them, but the information was not correct so that the military could launch a surprise attack. Ben felt like his father who had fought in World War II thought he was too weak and no longer wanted to live with this knowledge. Ben and his father never discuss their

problems because Ben kills himself before his father comes to visit him for the first time after the incident. The example in this book of a young adult having problems with his father is not conventional at all.

Angel also has some serious problems with her mother in *The Same Stuff as Stars*. She never expresses any of these feelings to her mother, either because Angel is so young her mother probably would not have listened to her anyway. Her most serious problem with her mother is that Angel does not trust her because she has been forgotten so many times before. This comes out when the “Star man” goes away too, and Angel blames herself. Then she realizes that is stupid, “she had to stop telling herself stuff like that. It was *him*. *He* was letting her down. Just like everyone else. That’s what grownups did. They got kids to trust them, and then they just let them go—blam. They didn’t know what it felt like to be dropped like that, or they didn’t care” (191). If Angel had expressed these feelings to her mother maybe she would have understood how Angel felt and tried to make things different with her.

### ***Problems with Parents- Comparative Analysis***

These three books show three very different instances of children having problems with their parents, so there are not many comparisons that can be drawn from this sample of books. One difference between the older and newer books is that in the older ones the character’s feelings are made more clearly to his parent. Max does so verbally to his father, while Ben does so by writing about it. In the newer book, Angel’s problems with her mother are addressed through other people. She yells at her great grandmother about lying to her, and she gets mad at the “Star man” for leaving her, but these are problems that she first had with her mother that she never addresses to her.

What can be seen through this analysis is that young adults have lots of different problems with their parents, and they often times have difficulty communicating them to the right people.

### **Grandparents**

Grandparents play a significant role in the lives of some of the characters in these books. They play a significant role in two of the older books and two of the newer books. In *Dacey's Song* and *The Same Stuff as Stars*, Grams and Grandma, respectively, find themselves taking care of their grandchildren or more precisely great grandchildren in *The Same Stuff as Stars*. The women in both books have a lot of baggage that they are carrying that affects how they interact with the children. Dacey's grandmother feels like she failed all of her children and even her husband because they are all gone, and she was left alone for so long. At first, she gets angry with the two boys that go up into the attic to look around because it seems that she is storing a lot of artifacts of her past up there that she does not want to talk about with the children. She does eventually open up more with them. She does a good job helping the children who have been mostly taken care of by Dacey up until their arrival on her front porch. She applies for and receives welfare, shows concern for their needs, and encourages them getting things that they have been denied, such as, Maybeth's piano lessons. The children are all very lucky that they were able to find her, and she is pleased that she gets the opportunity to raise them.

Angel and Bernie's great grandmother is not quite as helpful to them, which is understandable because she is much older and the children were dumped on her by Verna quite unexpectedly. There is not very much food in the house, and she does not seem to have very much money. Santy Claus does provide them with some necessary food stuffs,

but most of what they eat is whatever Angel can afford to buy them at the grocery store to which she must walk. Angel tries to educate her old grandmother about good nutrition, but she believes that she has done well enough on what she has been eating. Her baggage seems to be very similar to that of Dicey's grandmother. She believes that all of the men in her family have turned out bad since they have all ended up in jail at some point or another. She feels that she failed in raising her children because of this. She refuses to go see her son in the hospital when he is dying because she considers him already dead, but she does go with Angel to his funeral. She also holds a grudge against Miss Liza, the librarian that Angel befriends, from the time that she was in school. There are a few instances when she is helpful to Angel and Bernie, but she mostly sits in the rocking chair in the kitchen. She gets on the phone after lots of coaxing when people need to talk with an adult, and she goes with Bernie on his first day of school. She was hoping that she and Angel would be able to "put a stop to all these generations of losers" with Bernie since Angel was so good with him, but Verna took him away. She wanted to do good for the children, but she did not really have the means or the strength to do much.

In *Silent to the Bone*, Branwell refers to his grandparents as "The Ancestors." The Ancestors are the next people after Margaret that Branwell wants Connor to talk to in order to help Connor understand why he is not speaking. They seem like very close minded people because his grandfather says he is not surprised when he finds out that Tina Nguyen, Branwell's new stepmother, won a spelling bee by spelling a chemical element correctly in the fourth grade since "Orientals are very good at that sort of thing," and his grandmother adds "And fingernails" (54). During the time that Nikki was to be born, The Ancestors insisted on Branwell coming to stay with them for the month during

the summer as usual. They arranged everything so that “Branwell wouldn’t have to put up with all the commotion of the new baby” (58). Nobody asked Branwell what he wanted, and he would rather have been with his new family than playing tennis at The Ancestors. He seems to try to be the good grandson though by respecting their wishes even though he inwardly disagrees with much of their philosophies. What The Ancestors do to Branwell during Nikki’s birth separates him from that shared, happy moment with his family, which is part of what leads to his later problems.

Gilly’s grandmother only enters the picture at the end of *The Great Gilly Hopkins* when she finds out about Gilly’s existence. She did not know that she had a granddaughter because her own daughter was somewhat of a flower child that had left home and never returned. Gilly’s mother gets in contact with her own mother after Gilly sends her a postcard describing the horrible conditions that she finds herself in at Trotter’s home. So the grandmother comes to rescue her and take her back to her home to live. The only problem is that by this time Gilly has settled into her new home and says, “I don’t want to live with her” (119). She even pleads with Trotter to keep her from leaving, she says, “Trotter! Look at me! You said you’d never let me go. I heard you. Never! Never! Never! That’s what you said!” (120). Her grandmother tries to make everything all right. She pays Gilly’s mother to come for Christmas so that Gilly can see her mother, but she still does not want anything to do with Gilly. Gilly eventually accepts her new home and new situation, but really only does this because Trotter tells her to.

### ***Grandparents- Comparative Analysis***



Grandparents are seen similarly in both the older and newer books, with the exception of *Silent to the Bone*. Grandparents seem to be the saviors of the young adults when their parents can no longer do anything for them. In Branwell's case, his grandparents only *think* that they are saving him, but he does not feel that way. Both of the older books have grandmothers who intend on permanently keeping their grandchildren because Dicey's mother is dead and Gilly's mother still does not want her. In the newer book, *The Same Stuff as Stars*, it does not seem as if Angel's great grandmother is going to keep them. At the end of the book, Angel and Bernie discuss what they are going to do when their mom recovers from the car accident in which she and Bernie were hurt. When she gets better she will probably take over the care of her children just as Branwell's father still cares for him. The older books end with a more permanent influence of the grandparents than do the newer books.

### **Younger Siblings**

In two books, the main characters have younger siblings who, because of the absence of a parent, have become responsible or feel responsible for their younger siblings. In *The Same Stuff as Stars*, Angel puts up with Bernie's whining and spoiledness better than his own mother did. Grandma tells Angel, "You're more a mother to that boy than Verna ever was" (159). She constantly reassures him even though she is not sure about anything herself. Dicey also feels responsible for her younger siblings since she is the oldest. Some of the burden she feels is lifted with the presence of her grandmother to help with or at least share in the problems that they face. Sometimes Dicey has trouble letting go of all the responsibility and does not like no

longer being in charge. Both of these girls do a good job assuming the role of a mother in the absence of a good one.

Younger siblings are also discussed in *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Jason calls his younger sister “cootyhead,” but the real discussion is about little brothers. Jason is always complaining to his mother about Timmy, his younger stepbrother, stealing the dinosaurs that he collects to play with and gets them dirty. When the older boys want to camp out in the yard Timmy and Kippy, Peter’s little brother, want to join them, but the older boys do not want them there. They finally agree to allow them to stay, but try to have fun with them by scaring the younger boys so that they do not want to stay. After they are gone Richie, Jason’s friend, says that he is glad that he does not have a little brother. Jason tells him, “You oughta be. They ruin your whole damn life” (213). Jason later feels bad about saying this since it is very soon afterwards that Peter’s little brother is killed in a car accident, and he realizes that he misses having Kippy around.

### ***Younger Siblings- Comparative Analysis***

Younger siblings are handled in different ways in the older and newer books. *The Same Stuff as Stars* and *Dacey’s Song* are very similar even though they are from different time periods. They both have the oldest sibling taking care of the younger siblings. In the newer book, however, there is more detail about the things that Angel does for her younger brother. But the first book in the series of which *Dacey’s Song* is the second book probably has more details about what Dacey does to take care of her siblings because in that book she is on her own, and they are trying to find somewhere they can go. *Space Station Seventh Grade* seems to send the moral message that one should not say things that one will regret later as Jason did with regards to little brothers. This type

of message is not found in either of the other books, however. Interestingly enough even though the literature said that young adults have the highest amount of conflict with their siblings this is only really seen in one book, *Space Station Seventh Grade*. In the other books with younger siblings, there is not that much conflict between siblings.

### **Concern over grades/school**

Many of the books in this study are set primarily during the summer so school is not much of a topic (aside from the characters being glad to be out of school). But some of the characters show an interest in or concern about how well they do in school. Two older and one newer book discuss this topic. Amazingly enough, Gilly probably shows the greatest desire to do well in school. The reason this is interesting is due to the fact that “adolescents with a strong need for achievement usually come from families where parents have set high performance standards, have rewarded success during childhood, and have encouraged autonomy and independence” (Steinberg 393). Gilly has not had any of this except maybe independence since she has been a foster child most of her life. Her interest in school, however, is sparked by something that she sees as a challenge. Her first grade teacher told her foster mother that “she was afraid Gilly might be ‘slow’” (39). From then on Gilly was determined to “make the old parrot choke on her crackers. And she had” (39). When she starts out in her new school her teacher, Miss Harris, asks her if she had learned to do division with fractions at her previous school. Since she had not, “inside she [Gilly] seethed. It was bad enough having to come to this broken-down old school but to be behind—to seem dumber than the rest of the kids...” (22). Gilly’s plan is explained later, “she would work madly until she had not only caught up with but passed them all, and then she’d skid to a total halt” (44). Gilly was not going to let a

“bunch of low-class idiots think they were smarter than she was” (44). So Gilly’s concern about school is a desire to be better than everyone else. She thinks that she can do anything, and she works hard to prove herself. It seems strange that she would do this since she does not have anyone to do it for, but she does it for herself, which is why she tries so hard.

Dacey wants to concentrate on her schoolwork also and work on fixing up her boat so she does not think she has time to make any friends. She becomes friends with Mina, however, because they have a similar interest in doing well in school. They first become acquainted while working on a science project together. When both girls have their papers read out loud in front of their English class for being well written, and Dacey is accused of plagiarizing hers, Mina stands up for her. The teacher has to apologize for accusing her of something she did not do and change her grade. The only class that Dacey does not care about doing well in is home economics since she wanted to take the mechanical drafting class instead. She was not allowed because only boys got to take that class and girls had to take home economics. Dacey’s grandmother is concerned when Dacey brings home her report card and has an F in home economics and a C+ in English. The English grade is changed after the teacher realizes that Dacey did not cheat. Dacey and her grandmother are also concerned about Maybeth’s performance in school. Maybeth’s teacher keeps telling them that she is behind and gives her extra work to do. She works very hard on her schoolwork but does not seem capable of learning certain concepts. The whole family tries to help and eventually she seems to be improving. The Tillerman children do get encouragement to do well in school and their grandmother seems to be interested in how well they are doing.

In *It's Not Easy Being Bad*, Mikey makes up a new clique that she can be a part of, Smart Unpopular Dorks, SUDs. She tells Margalo she can be in it too, but Margalo protests, "I'm not unpopular...Not like you" (91). When the seventh grade has an assembly where honor roll and high honor roll students names are called out, Mikey decides she is going to get on the high honor roll list and make straight A's. Margalo thinks they both can do it, but Mikey thinks that math will keep Margalo from making all A's. When Mikey has to miss school with the flu she asks Margalo to get all of her assignments. She tells Margalo to get the assignments for "all of the classes. Not just the ones we're in together" and "Don't think you can keep me off of high honor roll by pretending to forget" (176). Mikey does not seem to want to do well in school for the satisfaction of gaining knowledge. She wants to do well so she feels like she has some place at school since it is obvious that it is not going to be as a popular kid.

### ***Concern Over Grade/School Expressed- Comparative Analysis***

The older books on this topic go into much more detail about characters wanting to do well in school. The desire to do well in school seems genuine in the older books as well. Mikey seems to only want to do well in school so that she can have something that she is good at in school. If she were allowed to play on the tennis team at school as a seventh grader she would probably not be as concerned about grades because, then she could be the star on the tennis team. Even the minor characters in the older books are trying to do well in school. William Ernest gets help from Gilly and all of the Tillerman children seem to want to do well in school so that they are not a problem to their grandmother. Schoolwork is more difficult for some characters in the older books, and it

is of greater concern for all the characters in the older books. Other issues at school such as being popular have become central to newer books instead of grades.

### **Popularity**

There are two books where popularity is a major discussion throughout the book: *Stargirl* and *It's Not Easy Being Bad*. *Space Station Seventh Grade* also has a little bit to add from a boy's perspective. Stargirl is a newcomer to Mica High School, and she is totally different from anyone the other students have ever met before. She stands out because the thing to do at Mica is be like everyone else and blend in. Instead, Stargirl wears different clothes, carries around a ukulele, has a pet rat, puts a flower in a vase on her desk in class, etc. At first, people at Mica like Stargirl despite all of her uniqueness. She gets fans to start coming to football games to see what crazy things she will do, and she is even asked to be a cheerleader. Then she holds the head of the other team's injured player in her lap, and she is seen as a traitor to her school. All of a sudden everyone sees how different she is, and they no longer like her. This does not seem to concern her because by this time she is dating Leo, and she only really cares about what he thinks. Leo has to explain to her what is going on. He says, "You don't seem to care what everybody thinks. You don't seem to *know* what everybody thinks." She asks him if he does and he says, "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do know. I'm in touch with everybody. I'm one of them. How could I not know?" (135). After this conversation Stargirl becomes Susan who looks like everyone else in order to try to fit in and be normal. The school still does not accept her, and the school shuns her as well as Leo. Leo is not used to this because he was a pretty popular kid before Stargirl came on the scene. Since he directed the school's show, *Hotseat*, people knew him. He eventually cannot take being an outcast

anymore especially when Stargirl returns in even more outlandish fashion and has to break things off with her. Stargirl's home schooling seems to have failed to teach her about the dynamics of school popularity.

Mikey and Margalo have a lot of discussions about wanting to be popular or at least have other people talk to them in *It's Not Easy Being Bad*. The whole first chapter is devoted to their discussion about popularity in the seventh grade at a new school. Margalo seems to know what it takes to be popular and probably could be if she were not Mikey's friend as she shows herself when Mikey is out of school sick. Margalo says, "I look closer [to normal], and how you look is what counts in seventh grade" (15). She also knew that "getting along with people meant them thinking you were no different from them" (24). Mikey tries to be popular by sending out invitations to people to come to a Halloween dinner party at her house. This plan totally backfires because nobody comes because they think it is a joke since they are not friends with her. Then in retaliation for this she throws her lunch all over one of the popular girls at school. Afterwards she says, "They've had their one and only chance with me. At least, now that's settled, I can stop trying to be popular. I can just concentrate on getting through the next six years any way I can" (48). Margalo seems to know what it takes to be popular in school whereas Mikey does not so they both remain unpopular. Then in the end, people want to be friends with Margalo because Heather is no longer popular because of the sweater fiasco.

Jason has a similar experience in making the shift from sixth grade to seventh grade in a new school in *Space Station Seventh Grade*. He says after the first week back at school, "I wish I was back in sixth grade. I was important there I'm nothing here. I'm

a turd” (21). The ninth graders are the ones who run the school, according to Jason, not the teachers or the principal. Jason and one of his friends get into trouble with some ninth graders because they are using their bathroom. A ninth grader pees on Jason’s friend’s shoe. After Jason and his friends learn where the ninth graders’ territory is, however, things are not quite as bad for them.

### ***Popularity- Comparative Analysis***

Popularity dynamics have changed between the older books and the newer books. In the older book, *Space Station Seventh Grade*, the popular students are the older students. The only way to be popular is to be the oldest group of students at the school. In both of the newer books, students can be popular within their grade, and the way to be popular is by looking normal and associating with the right people. Popularity has become more important to the stories in the newer books as well. The plot of both of the books is driven by characters trying to be popular to make their school existence more enjoyable. This change can be attributed to the fact that in the newer books the characters can do something to increase their popularity. They are not stuck in the unpopular grade so there can be stories about the characters trying to move up in the popularity ranks at school.

### **Puberty**

New occurrences that happen during puberty are mentioned in a few of the books. In *Space Station Seventh Grade* the boys have a conversation about which boys in their class have pubic hair. A whole chapter of the book is devoted to this topic. Branwell in *Silent to the Bone* refers to an erection that he got when he saw Vivian naked as “a very grown up thing” and Connor asks if he means, “Like a Viagra thing?” and Branwell nods



(246). He is made to think that this is a bad thing because Vivian feels it and she says, “Branwell Zamborska, you are a naughty boy” (247). He is ashamed and cannot tell his father or Tina about what is happening to him. For a girl’s perspective we turn to *Dacey’s Song* when Grams takes Dacey shopping, she makes her try on bras. Dacey is none too happy about this, but then her grandmother says, “The bra is just the beginning” (75). Dacey understands where her grandmother is going with this and assures her that she already knows about menstruating and sex. Mina also brings up this matter later when she says, “I began getting these bosoms when I was ten; started bleeding when I was eleven” (138). So for girls puberty is getting breasts and starting their period and for boys it is about getting pubic hair and getting erections.

### ***Puberty- Comparative Analysis***

The key difference between the older and newer books with regards to puberty is that the older books are more explicit about the changes that occur during puberty while the newer books concentrate more on feelings. This is interesting since when talking about interest in the opposite sex, the newer books are more explicit. Perhaps the older books are more explicit, especially for girls, because at that time authors felt it was more important to teach girls and boys about the changes that they experience during puberty. The reference to puberty in *Silent to the Bone* is implicit because Branwell’s erection is only referred to as a grown up or “Viagra thing.” His sexual excitement is only understood through the use of a metaphor. The newer books such as this one express the feelings young adults going through puberty have such as embarrassment. Branwell is so embarrassed about what happens that he cannot tell anyone for a long time. These types of feelings are not really addressed in the older books.

## Race

In some of these books race plays a major role in the story and in others it plays more of a background role. Race plays a role in four older books and one newer book. In *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, Gilly is a racist person for whatever reason, which is shown through her many comments about black people and the very racist card that she makes for her black teacher. The first night that Gilly stays at Trotter's she is asked to go get the man next door who eats dinner with them. Gilly assumes that the man will be a white man. When Mr. Randolph, a blind, black man, opens the door she "took one look and ran back to Trotter's kitchen as fast as she could go" (11). When Trotter explains that that is Mr. Randolph she tells Gilly to go back and "bring him by the hand, so he won't fall" to which Gilly responds "I never touched one of those people in my life" (11). Gilly may be racist because she has not had much contact with black people, but that should not be an acceptable reason for her feelings. When she is behind in school she comments, "almost half the class was black. And she would look dumb to *them*. A bunch of—" (22). Her worst moment is when she makes the card for Miss Harris that she puts in Miss Harris' Math book before class the next day. On the front of the card she pastes a picture of a tall, beautiful black woman with an Afro. Above the picture she wrote, "They're saying 'Black is beautiful!'" then below the picture she wrote

"But the best that I can figger  
Is everyone who's saying so  
Looks mighty like a—"

and inside the card she wrote "person with a vested interest in maintaining this point of view" (57). Gilly thought that she was so funny and so gifted for coming up with that card. She was totally shocked when she did not get a reaction out of Miss Harris until after class that day. Miss Harris thanks Gilly for helping her release some of her anger by

cursing creatively in the teachers' workroom for twenty minutes (59). After that Gilly has a better picture of black people and a lot more respect.

Blacks are also mentioned at school in *Dicey's Song*. No blatantly racist comments are made, as in Gilly's case, but there is a distinction made. When Gram learns who helps Dicey when the teacher accused her of cheating, she says, "Of course I will [like Mina]; I already do. But I'm a crazy old bat and my opinion's not worth a flea bite. I'm just wondering what her people will think. What they already think. About me" (122). Gram is making a distinction between her people and Mina's people, but according to Mina everyone thinks that Gram is a little crazy.

In *Space Station Seventh Grade*, Jason and his friends make some racist comments about a lot of different people. When they are talking about pubic hair, they say that Italians and blacks get it faster, and that Koreans do not get it at all. In the section about Halloween, Jason says that Calvin, a black friend, and Peter who is Korean do not have to dress up as anything because "they already were something" (66). Basically he is saying that white people are not anything all the time so they can dress up and people of other races do not have to dress up. He also says that Chinese is like Korean and one year he was going to dress up as a Chinese person by wearing a "coolie hat and a pair of those fake buckteeth" (66). Two of the boys laughed when Peter's little brother came dressed up as Fu Manchu because they thought it was funny to wear an "Oriental mask over an Oriental face" (67). Peter did not find the humor in it and explains to them that Fu Manchu is Chinese and his little brother is American. Jason also asks Peter if carrying around a picture of your grandmother in your wallet is a Korean thing to do. At this point Peter tells Jason, "I keep telling you. I don't know about

Koreans” (92). Jason has a hard time not seeing Peter as a Korean because of the way he looks even though he was born in the United States. He is not trying to be racist when he asks Peter about Korean things, but it is racist because he is not from Korea. Some of the other questions he asks him are about stereotypical ideas that people have about Asian people, which are not fair. These kids make a lot of distinctions between people because of their perceived race or their religious affiliation.

Race plays a background role in both *The Young Landlords* and *Handbook for Boys* because all of the characters are black and living in Harlem.

### ***Race- Comparative Analysis***

The explicit comments about race seem to have fallen out of young adult books today. The only new book that was put in this category was only put there because all the characters in the book were African Americans. In the older books, there is a distinction of races made that never enters into the newer books. African Americans are referred to as “those people,” “her people,” and “them,” for example. Racist comments are made in *The Great Gilly Hopkins* and *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Other than Walter Dean Myers’ book, there are not any characters of color in any of the other newer books. So it seems that only minority writers are writing about minorities these days. The lack of minorities is surprising since today’s schools are said to be a “mixture of many different races.” The literature for young adults is not in this sample of books. This could be because young people today do not care as much about race distinctions, but young adult literature should try to keep some diversity regardless of how young adults view race.

### **Death**

Different types of people die in these books: young, old, mothers, friends. They die in many different ways: murder, suicide, sickness. These facts go to show that anyone can die at anytime under many different circumstances. People are not invincible, as many young adults seem to think. The most touching death is that of Kippy Kim, Peter's little brother in *Space Station Seventh Grade*. All of Peter's friends seem to be upset about Kippy's death. When they went to the wake Jason says, "We hung back as long as we could...but all three of us were never ready at the same time" to go up to view the body (215). Their lives seem to be altered by Kippy's death. Jason is scared of the dark afterwards and even plays positions other than shortstop when they play baseball. When he plays outfield he says, "It's so quiet out there, just you and the ball. You hear your feet running. They seem to say, *Kippy's dead. Kippy's dead. Kippy's dead*" (218). Kippy was only four years old and died in a car accident. The boys are very affected by his death because they had always tried to get out of having him tag along with them because that was annoying, and now, he was dead.

It is the reader of *After the First Death* who must not only deal with the death of a child, but also that of many other people. The first death in the book is that of one of the children on the hijacked bus who must have had a bad reaction to the sedatives they were given. The reader also knows from Kate and Miro's thoughts that Miro's job is to kill Kate. She sees it in his eyes. The reader holds hope that she will not be killed though. The next deaths after the child, however, are those of the other hijackers during the military siege of the bus. Miro is able to escape with Kate, but he does eventually kill her even as she is trying to get into his head to save her own life. The last death, which is never known explicitly, is that of Ben who commits suicide because he cannot deal with

the knowledge that he gained through his involvement with the hijackers of the bus.

Even though the title of the book has the word death in it, the many deaths of the book can be shocking to the reader.

Another child's death is that of Alicia Bartlett in *The Rag and Bone Shop*. Her own brother murders her, but Jason is expected of the murder initially because her brother made up a false alibi. Due to the circumstance of being interrogated Jason is not really able to mourn the death of his friend who he had just seen prior to her death. During the interrogation "sadness welled up within him [Jason] as he thought of Alicia and the last time he had seen her, not knowing it would be the last time" (99). Later Jason is again upset because "the image of Alicia dead and the way she must have looked hidden under the brush and branches when they found her caused him to shudder a bit" (106). Through the interrogation, Trent is able to get Jason to confess to a murder that he did not commit. This leaves his mind twisted, and he then contemplates committing a real murder.

Two books also address young adults being faced with adult deaths. Dicey's mother has been in a mental institute after abandoning her children. Gram gets letters periodically from the doctors there updating her on her daughter's state. Eventually, she gets a letter saying that her daughter is about to die. She and Dicey go to see her before her death and to take care of arrangements after her death. Dicey is able to see her mother and talk to her even though she is not responsive. She seems to handle her mother's death rather well, possibly because she had already died to her and was no longer in pain. What mattered to her was keeping what was left of her family together. They were able to take her mother's ashes back home in the beautiful wooden box that

Dacey had chosen for them, and the children helped bury her under a tree in the front yard. Dacey's siblings were not able to see their mother again, but they do not seem to question why Dacey was the only one allowed to go and handle the situation well. James says, "She's really gone now" and Sammy says, "I still love her" to which Gram says, "I should think so" (193). These children have already lost so much in their lives that they are happy with what they do have.

Finally, Angel must cope with yet another person whom she has come to trust leaving her. The "Star man" is sick and is about to have an operation. Angel tries to convince her great grandmother that he is a good man, but she feels that her son died in Vietnam because what came back afterwards was a "zombie" who was messed up on drugs and spent time in jail. Angel is not able to convince her to go to the hospital to see him, but she goes by herself to see him. She tells him that she does not want him to die, and he says, "Don't be mad at me, Angel. If I'd known you were coming back, I'd have taken better care of myself. It's too late now, but I'm grateful I lived long enough to point you at the stars" (215). The "Star man" dies and Angel and her great grandmother go to the funeral. Angel has also already been left by a lot of people in her life, but the "Star man" left her with something she could cherish the rest of her life, a love of the stars.

### ***Death- Comparative Analysis***

In this sample, the deaths in the newer books are of people the protagonist considers to be a friend whereas the older books have deaths of family members or people the protagonists know but are not close to. Death is most common in Cormier's books since multiple people die in *After the First Death* and a little girl is murdered in

*The Rag and Bone Shop*. In the first book, Kate does not know the boy who died because she was just filling in as bus driver that day. Kate speculates that Artkin, one of the terrorists, is Miro's father, but there is no proof of this. As far as we know he was just his trainer in terrorist strategies. The reader does not really know how any of the other terrorists are connected. Ben, who commits suicide, is one of the protagonists so his death follows the pattern the other older books do. In the latter book, Alicia is Jason's friend, and he is upset by her death. In the other newer book, *The Same Stuff as Stars*, Angel considers the "Star man" to be her friend and does not realize that she is related to him because she thought that the person who he is was dead already. So she mourns him as a friend and not as a relative. In *Dicey's Song*, the Tillerman children's mother dies and in *Space Station Seventh Grade* one of Jason's friends' brother dies. Jason is extremely disturbed by this even though he was not that close to Kippy. Characters in the older books also express feelings of pain because of the person's death, but their connection is different.

### **Neighborhood**

Since Walter Dean Myers is an African American author from Harlem he sets many of his stories set in that neighborhood. The two books used in this study are no exceptions and so race plays an important role in the lives of the characters even though it is not something that is directly discussed. *Handbook for Boys* especially highlights the many problems in which young African American boys and girls have to deal with these days. At the barbershop, Jimmy encounters a woman who is strung out on drugs, a twenty year old man who has three kids with three different women, another man whose wife kicked him out of the house because he did not have a job, and many other



characters dealing with life in the ghetto. In *The Young Landlords* the kids recognize the problems of the slums in their neighborhood, but they do not understand why it is that way until they become the owners of the building. Gloria and Paul have a discussion about their tenants who do not pay rent for various reasons: being in the hospital, not having a job, and just refusing like Askia Ben Kenobi. These are very real situations with which people growing up in this type of area have to deal.

### ***Neighborhood- Comparative Analysis***

The newer book looks more closely at the problems of the ghetto and the causes of those problems than the older book does. The older book only looks at reasons why people cannot pay their rent, but this could happen to people in any neighborhood probably just not all in the same building. Through Duke's discussions with Jimmy, the reader sees that he thinks that using growing up in the ghetto as an excuse for not making anything out of oneself is a cop out. He does not want Jimmy to be complacent and run into the same problems that the people who come into the barbershop do. Duke encourages Jimmy to read, to control his temper, to do well in school, and not to rely on basketball as his ticket out of the ghetto. He uses the products of the neighborhood that are positive and negative influences to illustrate his point. There are more harsh realities of the ghetto addressed in this book than the older one.

### **Jobs/Working**

One newer and one older book have characters that work in them. Jimmy does not willingly work at Duke's barbershop in *Handbook for Boys*, it is a court order so that he can stay out of a juvenile facility. At first, he does not like it very much because he feels like the old men that hang out there and Duke are constantly putting him down. At

one time he gets angry with them and does not go back to work for a few days. He does not return until Duke comes to his house and talks with his mother. Jimmy comes home and Duke asks him if he wants to give it another try. If he does not, he tells Jimmy that he will have to report it to the judge, and Jimmy will have to go to the juvenile facility. Jimmy decides to go back, and eventually comes to value what he is learning there.

Dacey convinces Millie at the local grocery store that if she gave her a job cleaning up the store, then the store's sales would increase in *Dacey's Song*. Dacey wants to get a job so that she can help support her family. She is very dedicated to her work. She makes sure that she gets there immediately after school everyday and even wants to work over holidays. Her working there does help Millie out a lot, but the sales of the store do not increase that greatly. Dacey cleans the windows and the shelves, checks the shelves for expired goods, and helps Millie with the orders since Millie tends to accidentally order too much of the wrong things.

### ***Jobs/Working- Comparative Analysis***

The situations in which these characters work are very different. Jimmy does it because he has to by law and Dacey does it because she feels that it is an obligation to her family that she should help out financially. A newer book would probably not have someone as young as Dacey working since it is not legal for thirteen year olds to work without their parents' permission. Young adults Dacey's age today would probably not be interested in working, and if they were it would probably not be a good idea. The conditions under which Dacey gets her job and works are not very realistic for today's young adult either. Dacey working at the grocery store is actually very helpful to Millie, however, whereas Jimmy's work at the barbershop is not really that necessary. The work

that he and Kevin do there is mostly invented by Duke to keep them occupied and out of trouble. The nature of the work force continues to require more and more these days, so that young adults today need to concentrate more on getting a good education.

This concludes the analysis of the individual themes found in the books used for this study. What follows are some general statements that can be made about each of the authors selected for this sample as well as final analysis of the themes and concluding statements.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

Although this study only examined two titles written by each author some general statements can be made using knowledge gained through this study and an examination of the literature on each of these authors. E. L. Konigsburg is an author who consistently pushes issues to extremes. Both of her books in this study, *Journey to an 800 Number* and *Silent to the Bone*, are exceptions in the way many of the themes are treated when compared to other books from the same period. She is known for being “appealing to sophisticated preteens,” though, so she knows her audience (Drew 214). Katherine Paterson uses similar themes in both of her books, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* and *The Same Stuff as Stars*. Most of her works are placed in the family and inspirational drama category, which both of these books could be put in (Drew 339). In both books the main characters have felt rejected a lot and hesitate in opening up to new people because they do not want to get hurt again. Both of Robert Cormier’s books force the reader to think about humanity and society. They have a lot more to them than is seen on the surface of the story. As a writer for young adults, Cormier is known for unusual plots, suspense, and making readers think (Drew 77). Of his works, he says, “People don’t ride off into

the sunset in my books, they walk off hobbled and crippled maybe, into the dark night” (Drew 79). The books in this sample are no exception. Walter Dean Myers, as he does in many of his other books, explores the nature of Harlem and growing up in the ghetto. He tries to “stress the positive attributes of the experiences and environment of his characters without shunning the negative elements” (Drew 289). Jerry Spinelli continues to explore the realities of life for young adults. He depicts real pictures of school life for a middle school student and a high school student in the books in this sample. He looks at both the “humor and poignancy of growing up” (Drew 391). Cynthia Voigt’s two books for this study show the most change of any of the authors. Mikey and Margalo are very different characters from Dicey Tillerman. They care about being popular and Mikey goes out of her way to get into trouble whereas Dicey does not care about having friends and is not an aggressive character. Other than Voigt, the works of the authors used for this study have similar characteristics while treating the themes analyzed in this study differently.

Some of the themes addressed in this study exhibit obvious changes between the 1980’s and the 2000’s while other themes have not changed very much. In the mid-1990’s “an expansion of the audience, which freed authors to tackle more serious subjects and to introduce more complex characters and considerations of ambiguity” occurred according to Michael Cart who teaches young adult literature classes at UCLA (Cart 97). This claim plays out in the theme of friendship since the newer books depict friendships that have more depth and development than the older books. The friendships are more likely to be unusual rather than typical as well. These changes must be more appealing to the wider, younger audience reading young adult literature today.

The changes in the following themes seem to reflect society's idea that children are growing up faster these days. Young adults get into more serious trouble in the more recent books. This trend in the literature seems to reflect changes in a society that has seen students opening fire on fellow students in places like Columbine. More characters in the recent books are seen as being poor as opposed to talking about other people who are poor. This shift is an acknowledgement that young adults are old enough to understand that everyone does not have the same amount of money, but that does not make them any less of a person. Young adults are less concerned about school in the newer books. They care more about being popular instead. Authors have come to write about the fact that "athletic and social success are more reliable routes to popularity with peers than is academic success" (Steinberg 161). People may not like this, but it is a reality in our society where appearances count for more than ability. Authors are also more explicit about young adults' interest in the opposite sex. The taboo against talking openly about the feelings that young adults have about the opposite sex at this age seems to have been lifted. The physical changes of puberty are no longer discussed as much because now they are discussing the feelings associated with it more. Authors are going below the surface of this adolescent change and getting into the mind of the adolescent instead. Young adults are not always as happy as they were in the past with the remarriage of a parent. Readers are more likely to see the harsh realities one faces when a parent decides to get remarried. It is not sugar-coated the way it was in the past. In young adult books, race seems to have become much less of an issue. Young adults today do not seem to care about race as much as they did in the past. This will probably be a continuing trend as we get farther away from the Civil Rights Movement, but it may

have ill effects as well. There are still people in our society that hold racist beliefs and by not facing that fact we are doing an injustice to our young people. Characters experience the death of close friends in the newer books, sometimes violent deaths. This is also a reality that today's young adults face. The influence a person's neighborhood has on their development is an important distinction to make. For young adults living in the ghetto, it is important for them not to give up on themselves making a difference as more and more minorities find themselves in poverty.

The other themes have not seen as much obvious change over the past twenty years. Divorce, single parenthood, death, grandparents, younger siblings, and problems with parents are shown in similar ways in books from both time periods. Grandparents remain young adult's saviors when their own parents cannot help them. Younger siblings are always a nuisance for which the eldest sibling feels some responsibility. Young adults continually have problems with their parents because that is part of growing up, but communication between the generations does seem to be getting worse. All of these themes are things that young adults have been experiencing before the books in this study were written so they are treated similarly in books from both the 80's and the 2000's. The adolescent and the society in which s/he lives is forever changing and evolving so too will the literature for young adults. The authors and works chosen for this study represent some of the best that is available in this field. The trends found in newer books are towards characters being more developed, the truth about society being told, and the idea that some things stay the same. These trends acknowledge the sophistication of today's young adults and that they can handle the truth.

## Appendix A

	Friendship	Trouble	Money	Divorce	Opposite Sex	School
<u>After the First Death</u>					×	
<u>The Rag and Bone Shop</u>	×	×			×	
<u>Journey to an 800 Number</u>	×		×	×	×	
<u>Silent to the Bone</u>	×	×		×	×	
<u>The Young Landlords</u>	×	×	×		×	
<u>Handbook for Boys</u>	×	×		×		
<u>The Great Gilly Hopkins</u>	×	×	×			×
<u>The Same Stuff as Stars</u>	×		×			
<u>Space Station Seventh Grade</u>	×	×		×	×	
<u>Stargirl</u>					×	
<u>Dacey's Song</u>	×	×	×		×	×
<u>It's Not Easy Being Bad</u>	×	×	×	×		×
Old	5	4	4	2	5	2
New	5	4	2	3	3	1
<b>Totals</b>	10	8	6	5	8	3

	Remarriage	Single Parent	Race	Popularity	Parent Problems	Puberty
<u>After the First Death</u>					×	
<u>The Rag and Bone Shop</u>						
<u>Journey to an 800 Number</u>	×	×			×	
<u>Silent to the Bone</u>	×	×				×
<u>The Young Landlords</u>			×			
<u>Handbook for Boys</u>		×	×			
<u>The Great Gilly Hopkins</u>			×			
<u>The Same Stuff as Stars</u>		×			×	
<u>Space Station Seventh Grade</u>	×		×	×		×
<u>Stargirl</u>				×		
<u>Dicey's Song</u>		×	×			×
<u>It's Not Easy Being Bad</u>	×	×		×		
Old	2	2	4	1	2	2
New	2	4	1	2	1	1
<b>Total</b>	4	6	5	3	3	3



	Death	Siblings	Neighborhood	Working	Grandparents
<u>After the First Death</u>	×				
<u>The Rag and Bone Shop</u>	×				
<u>Journey to an 800 Number</u>					
<u>Silent to the Bone</u>					×
<u>The Young Landlords</u>			×		
<u>Handbook for Boys</u>			×	×	
<u>The Great Gilly Hopkins</u>					×
<u>The Same Stuff as Stars</u>	×	×			×
<u>Space Station Seventh Grade</u>	×	×			
<u>Stargirl</u>					
<u>Dicey's Song</u>	×	×		×	×
<u>It's Not Easy Being Bad</u>					
Old	3	2	1	1	2
New	2	1	1	1	2
<b>Total</b>	5	3	2	2	4

## Appendix B

### Older Books

- Cormier, Robert. *After the First Death*. New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1979.
- Konigsburg, E. L. *Journey to an 800 Number*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *The Young Landlords*. New York: Viking Press, 1979.
- Paterson, Katherine. *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. New York: Harper Collins, 1978.
- Spinelli, Jerry. *Space Station Seventh Grade*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1982.
- Voigt, Cynthia. *Dacey's Song*. New York: Atheneum, 1982.

### Newer Books

- Cormier, Robert. *The Rag and Bone Shop*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2001.
- Konigsburg, E. L. *Silent to the Bone*. New York: Atheneum, 2000.
- Myers, Walter Dean. *Handbook for Boys*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002.
- Paterson, Katherine. *The Same Stuff as Stars*. New York: Clarion, 2002.
- Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.
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